

Effects of Television Violence on Children

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Senator Ernest Hollings, Chair
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Senator Hollings, distinguished Committee members, ladies and gentlemen. I am honored to speak in favor of legislation designed to protect our children from the insidious effects of viewing violence on television by promoting safe harbor hours from 6 A.M. to 10 P.M. For the past 40 years I have been engaged in research in the development of aggression in children. I am a former President of the International Society for Research in Aggression, Editor of the Journal of Abnormal Psychology and Chair of the American Psychological Association's Commission on Violence and Youth.

As has been recognized by you in previous reports, television is the most obvious, ubiquitous, and potent source of information available to children growing up in the U.S.A. Children are not only being entertained, but educated by television. The information they receive from the endless number of cartoons, sitcoms, and prime time programs that pervade the air waves cannot help but affect the way they interact with and view society. The telecommunication revolution of the 20th century has created a new environment for children in which television, videos, CD's and movies have assumed central roles in socializing them while parents have lost influence. For better or worse, the mass media are having an enormous impact on our children's values, beliefs, and behaviors.

Extensive exposure to TV in early childhood promotes cognitions (i.e. beliefs, attitudes, and justifications) which support the use of aggression and violence in solving interpersonal problems, relieving frustration, and acquiring material possessions as well as power and influence over others. The cognitions learned through this early exposure affect behavior not only concurrently, but also over time and their influence can be detected in the aggressive, antisocial, and criminal behaviors of young adults.

Since 1960, a body of evidence coming from both laboratory research and survey studies based on real life experience has confirmed that there is a causative relation between the observation of aggression and violence on television and subsequent aggressive and violent behavior on the part of the observer. This is especially true for young children, and for them, the effect is not just temporary, but is sustained over the years. For example, one study conducted by my colleagues and me in 1960 in Columbia County, New York, shows that the amount of violence youngsters watch on television at age 8 is related to their aggressiveness 10 years later (as reported to Senator Pastore's Committee in 1972) and to the seriousness of criminal acts 22 years later at age thirty. These relations hold up even when initial aggressiveness, IQ, and social class are statistically controlled.

This finding of a causal link between the watching of violent television and subsequent aggressive behavior is not an isolated finding among a unique or nonrepresentative population in one area of the U.S., at a particular time. Seventeen years after the original data collection in New York State, we studied another large group of youngsters in a different geographical section of the U.S., a heterogeneous suburb of Chicago, following them for three consecutive years and then 15 years later when they were in their early twenties, and obtaining essentially the same results. Early viewing of television violence is causally related to aggressive behavior at that time as well as to future behavior. Further, this study has now been replicated in three other countries, Finland, Israel and Poland. The same long term effects were found and the data from all four countries investigated in the study clearly indicate that more aggressive children watch more

television, prefer more violent programs, identify more with TV characters, and perceive violence as more like real life than do less aggressive children. Further, it became clear that the relation between TV habits and aggression is no longer limited to boys as we had found in the original study. Girls, too, are now affected.

Over 40 years of research by many behavioral scientists has validated the causal connection between the observation of television violence and the subsequent violent behavior of young viewers, with a significant carryover into adulthood. To date, there have been at least four meta analyses of the extant literature, all of which come to the same conclusion. (Meta analysis refers to a quantitative aggregation of research results permitting conclusions about the size of the causal effect from an objective and comprehensive survey of the literature.) For example, one published meta analysis summarized and aggregated 217 of the best studies done between 1957 and 1990, and the authors concluded that research findings obtained during that period strengthen the evidence that viewing television violence increases aggressive and antisocial behavior. The results from study to study are robust. All types of aggressive behavior, including illegal behaviors and criminal violence, had highly significant effect sizes associated with exposure to television violence. The best estimate of these meta analyses is that 10% of all youth violence can be attributed to violent television.

A number of national commissions composed of eminent scholars who have reviewed all of the available studies have all come to the same conclusion--there is a causal relation between viewing violent television and subsequent behavior. To date at least four professional organizations have issued position papers endorsing the reduction of violence in the mass media (American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child Psychiatry, and American Psychological Association).

Of course, media violence alone cannot account for the development of all serious anti-social behavior. It is, however, a potential contributor to the learning environment of children who eventually go on to develop aggressive and violent behavior. Furthermore, research supports

the view that the effect of violence viewing on aggression is relatively independent of other likely influences and is of a magnitude great enough to account for socially important differences. The current level of interpersonal violence has certainly been boosted by the long term effects of many persons' exposure to a steady diet of TV violence when they were children.

Despite this overwhelming evidence, the television industry has not accepted responsibility for the damage being done by its violent programming. Grudgingly in the past year they have agreed to use warning labels for programs with excessive violence deemed not appropriate for child viewers -- soon they will have the V-chip, but its usefulness will depend on the validity of the rating systems and we have not seen any evidence for that as yet. They have also arranged with independent agencies to do annual monitoring of the amount of television violence being shown on national and cable stations. Although these studies have thus far shown an increase in the amount of violence being portrayed, this does not seem to have affected programming. When big bucks are involved, the industry moves very slowly. Senators, they need a push!